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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000324

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: GENERAL SLEIMAN ON GAZA, US NAVY IN
EASTERN MED, ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

REF: BEIRUT 203

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Charge met with Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman March 3 for an overview of the past week: Gaza, U.S. Navy ship movements, and continued speculation on the Arab League Summit. Sleiman was frank and constructive during the meeting, offering feedback on Charge's recent media interaction and encouraging continuing USG outreach on what the United States is doing to support Lebanon, including economic, military, and security assistance. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Charge d, Affaires a.i. Sison met Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman March 3 in a one-on-one session. Sleiman opened the conversation by reporting that he had called together his LAF unit commanders at 7:30 a.m. that day to urge LAF preparedness, particularly in south Lebanon, given Hizbullah-Israel tensions and the weekend's events in Gaza. More than twenty of his senior LAF officers had attended. There had been scattered demonstrations by Palestinian refugees over the weekend, Sleiman reported. He added that the LAF had no specific information regarding increased tensions along the border with Israel. There had been some discussion of the U.S. naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean during his session with his unit commanders, Sleiman noted. The message was clear that the U.S. vessels were there in support of regional stability and were operating in international waters.

¶3. (C) Morale in the army remained strong, said Sleiman. "Informal talks" between the LAF and representatives of Hizballah and Amal were ongoing. Although the level of tension had risen after the January 27 shootings in which eight Shia protesters had been killed by LAF fire, Hizballah and Amal political representatives were "acting responsibly" in seeking a solution with the LAF. A formula involving some type of reparation payments to the families concerned was likely, he added. All Lebanese -- Christian, Sunni, Shia, and Druze -- wanted a strong LAF, avowed Sleiman. Not even Hizballah supporters wished to destroy the army, he insisted.

14. (C) Charge asked Sleiman about comments made the day before on a Voice of Lebanon radio broadcast by Prime Minister Siniora, s senior advisor, Mohammed Chatah. In discussing the proposed Arab League Summit in Damascus March 29-30, Chatah stated that only the Government of Lebanon could decide who would represent Lebanon at the AL Summit. In response to a direct question, Chatah had downplayed the possibility that the Cabinet might ask Speaker Nabih Berri to represent the country (the notion had circulated in some circles over the weekend). In response to another question, Chatah had said during the radio broadcast that the Government "might choose" Sleiman to represent the country at an AL summit. (Note: Charge spoke later in the day with Chatah, who confirmed that the idea of sending Sleiman to Damascus was purely speculative on his part. More likely, he hinted, would be a formula under which key Christian Cabinet Ministers) Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad or Justice Minister Charles Rizk) might be asked to represent Lebanon at the AL summit) but if and only if Saudi Arabia decided to attend the summit at something lower than the chief of state level. Chatah added that several constitutional experts had noted that the Cabinet could lawfully decide to send any individual or group of individuals it agreed upon to an AL summit. End Note.)

15. (C) General Sleiman told Charge that he had only learned of Chatah's statements that morning and that there had been no prior discussion of his representing Lebanon in Damascus with the Prime Minister or members of the PM's team. If PM Siniora or the Cabinet asked him to attend the summit, he would do so "as a candidate of consensus," said Sleiman. However, thus far, no one had approached him on this matter. As for Berri going to Damascus, said Sleiman, "c'est du blah-blah." Turning toward regional partners' interests in the AL Summit, Sleiman stated that the Saudi Embassy, s instruction to Saudi citizens in Lebanon to return home had

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been "purely political." Perhaps this was a pressure tactic related to the AL summit, but perhaps the warning to Saudi nationals reflected KSA concerns that its citizens would be implicated in the killing of Hizballah operative Mugnieh.

16. (C) Sleiman then asked for greater U.S. understanding of Syria's positive steps in combating terror. He noted that there were more Christians in Syria than there were in Lebanon, arguing that this should be considered by the U.S. when considering the dangers of Salafist tendencies in the region. Charge pointed out that Syria continues to undermine efforts to stabilize Iraq and allows its territory to be used for such purposes. Moreover, Syria continued to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy.

17. (C) Sleiman opined that Hizballah would seek to avoid a flare-up of Shia-Sunni tensions in Lebanon for the time being, out of Hizballah concern that such a spike would alienate supporters of Christian ally Michel Aoun. Sleiman also noted that there had not been demonstrations in the neighborhood of the American Embassy in Awkar, north of Beirut, since the Aoun-Hizballah alliance had been formed. Sleiman closed the meeting by passing Charge a copy o a cartoon which appeared in today's "Al Kifah Al Arabi" magazine. The drawing shows President Bush tossing away photos of the Free Patriotic Movement chief and the LAF Commander and passing a photo of Charge Michele Sison to Lebanon with the words, "You don't want Michel Aoun and you don't want Michel Sleiman, so elect Michele Sison" coming from POTUS' mouth.

18. (C) COMMENT. General Sleiman's comments about Syria's role in combating terror are not suprising. He has never hidden his relationship with Syria from us nor his desire to maintain a good relationship with Bashar al Asad's regime.
END COMMENT. SISON
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